

Interview with Ruth Kahn

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Foreign Service Spouse Series

RUTH KAHN

Interviewed by: Shelley Getchell

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Q: This is Shelley Getchell interviewing Ruth Kahn on November 11, 1992.

First, I'm aware that you're from the Middle West originally, isn't that true? (Kahn confirms)
I think we ought to know a bit about who you were and the rest of your life, which in your case there was quite a lot of.

KAHN: I was born in North Dakota and my childhood was spent about 120 miles west of Minneapolis, not too far from a site of the Sioux Indians. At any rate, I didn't know much about the Indians, although they've proven since to be interesting.

I graduated from high school there, went on to college, became a nurse, was married. The man I married was in the wildlife business, so we spent many years throughout the Midwest and ultimately settled in Washington, DC in 1974. I have four children, three of whom live in the Minneapolis area, the fourth in Chicago. My two oldest daughters are married to physicians who work with the Mayo Clinic and my son is with an electronics company. My younger daughter has a Ph.D. in zoology and teaches at Loyola Medical School in Chicago.

In 1974 I moved here and shortly thereafter began work at the National Institutes of Health. Also around that time I continued my education, earning my Masters degree in

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nursing from Catholic University in 1976. I continued on toward a doctoral degree. In 1982, my husband became very ill and died shortly of a brain tumor, which was pretty devastating for me. By that time, my four children had left home, of course, and were in their college years, but I was too young to retire from my work, so I continued at NIH.

Q: Had you been doing all this studying to get your Masters and Doctorate while your children were still young?

KAHN: Well, part of the time they were young. When I was in Minnesota I completed work on a Bachelors degree in nursing at the University of Minnesota, a time when my children were quite small. However, by the time I was working here at Catholic University, my only child at home was our youngest daughter.

I was a very energetic person. It was fun. I always considered going to school a sort o(laughing) interesting experience. I saw it as sort of a hobby. But it was something that I wanted to achieve. I was in the middle of my doctoral work, actually, when my husband died and I decided to remain in Bethesda where I lived and continue my work as Chief of Nursing Education at NIH. During my time as a widow, I had had a Vietnamese cleaning woman whom I'd brought in to clean up some smears on the walls my young daughter's friends had made. One day at work I said to somebody, "Gee, my maid is gone, I'm desperate, I'm so busy coming to work and going to school, what I really need is someone to come in and help." One of the girls said, "I know somebody. We call her a member of the Brazilian mafia," a group who often worked for diplomats. That weekend I had a phone call from one Luisa, who said "I can come to work for you Saturday."

So she came to my house. She was terribly interested, I thought, in me as a widow, asked me a lot of questions. While cleaning the living room she picked up a brochure on the coffee table about a ballet performance that weekend at Kennedy Center, and came running with it to the kitchen. "You like ballet?" I said, "Ummm, yes, I like ballet." She said, "You go? You go every week?" I said, (she laughs) "No, I don't go every week but I do go

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occasionally.” She went back to the living room. A few minutes she returned, bearing a brochure from a symphony concert, saying, “You go to the symphony?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “You have season's tickets?” I said, “As a matter of fact, I do.”

One of the things I'd done during my widowed time was go to the Symphony on Tuesday and Friday nights because it killed time. I had a group of Tuesday night friends and a group of Friday night friends, my symphony pals. Luisa went back to the living room. When she came the next week, she inquired again — I thought she seemed unusually interested for a maid who was really only moonlighting with me. She worked full-time like a housekeeper for Lu [my present husband] and took care of Melissa. Little by little, it leaked out: what she was really seeking was someone to be a girlfriend to the man she worked for!

Q: It seems like she was also moonlighting as a matchmaker, right?

KAHN: (laughing) That was what she was doing, more than anything. Anyway, she kept talking this way. Then she talked to Lu, and he eventually called me at my work at NIH, saying, “Luisa thinks we should meet.” I thought, well, I don't know if this is a good idea or not. Then in the back of my mind I remembered my mother's saying when we were growing up, in terms of the young men we were dating, “You might not like him but he might have a friend.” And I thought, “Well, this isn't so bad... I don't know that I ever want to marry again,” but by this time in my widowhood I had begun to see other men. So I thought, “We-e-ell, all right.” So I let Luisa talk me into it and agreed to meet Lu. That was really the beginning of my exposure to the life of people in the Foreign Service.

Q: I wanted to ask you, at the time you met Lu you were still working on your doctorate in addition to working full-time as a nursing supervisor. What was the subject of that doctorate, and how far had you gotten with it? Had you finished the course work?

KAHN: Oh, that was very interesting. At the time that I met Lu, I was really choosing a topic for my dissertation and beginning some of the preliminary work. I had finished most

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of my course work — I think while I was dating him I was finishing my last semester of course work. I would work all day, go over to Catholic University to one or two classes, whatever they were at the time, and then drop by at Hall Place and see Lu on my way home to Bethesda. Obviously I remember when I was, yes indeed, taking course work. I believe I had completed my comprehensives, however.

Q: Basically you still had your dissertation to do. You still hadn't chosen the topic?

KAHN: I had chosen a topic. As a result of my widowhood, I'd become quite interested in the grieving process, in the whole area of bereavement and what it meant to people to lose someone. Originally I was planning that my dissertation would look at intervention to help widows. I was trying to find something that would alleviate the depression and loss of self-esteem and so on that many widows experienced; including myself.

Q: A different psychology?

KAHN: No, psychiatric nursing. So I had thought that would be a very interesting topic, and I had pursued that. However, as I was pursuing this in my work at NIH, it had been suggested to me that maybe I should try and do my dissertation work at NIH. In which case although they didn't happen to have widows, in terms of the situations where bereavement was a very difficult issue, it was very difficult for mothers whose children who died from cancer to be restored to a good state of mental health.

So I had become interested to work with the [mothers] and with the physician in charge of the pediatrics work there and with the idea of building my dissertation instead of around widows and bereavement, around mothers of children who died of cancer.

Q: Then, how long did you and Lu know each other before you decided to get married?

KAHN: I think we met in about October. We started to go together, neither of us had anyone special in our life, and as soon as we realized we liked each other we saw each

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other often. I think it was about late February when Lu wondered if I wanted to marry him. This was sort of a surprise to me because, to tell you the truth, I had not really envisioned myself as somebody getting married again.

Lu had been a widower for many years. Maybe I should tell you a bit about that because I think it's important in terms of our story and how we became acquainted. The first thing after we became acquainted and I started going with him I recall his saying to me one day as I was taking him to the train at Union Station, "Melissa wants to meet you." I thought, "Who's Melissa?" I knew he had a daughter but this was very early on when we'd gone together maybe only two or three times. So I thought, "Who is Melissa that she wants to meet me?" I knew it was his daughter, but I really doubted that this child of 12 had the idea, I thought it was his idea. And of course, it turned out to be his idea. At any rate he said, "She wants to be a nurse." (laughing heartily) And he said it would be good if I met her and talked to her about nursing. So I thought that was a good idea, and I guess it was a week or so later that I met Melissa.

She was 12 years old. We liked each other immediately and really had a good time together. Then she told me that her mother had died, although of course Lu had told me the story earlier. I think that's one of the things that brought Lu and me together — both of us had experienced the devastation of cancer. My husband had died of metastatic brain tumor, as Beverly had also. We shared a very unusual common experience.

Q: I thought she died of a melanoma?

KAHN: She had melanoma but it had metastasized and formed brain tumors. The great tragedy was that Melissa was three years old when her mother died, and that was a very difficult experience for Lu to try to continue his career in the Foreign Service as a widower. Society at that time really wasn't prepared for a father to raise a daughter alone. Frequently, I know, he experienced criticism for doing it and people would say, "Why don't you let her go and live with her mother's sister?" or "She really shouldn't be raised by her

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father.” So he experienced a great deal of what I would call societal disagreement with the idea of a father raising a daughter.

Q: That surprises me, and I think that's dead wrong. I think if there's one parent living, that child should if at all possible be raised by that parent, don't you think so?

KAHN: Oh [absolutely].

Q: Because the Foreign Service officer may in many cases get assigned to a country where he can get enough household so that that is not a problem.

KAHN: I can tell you a funny story associated with this. When Melissa went to school, Lu would have a taxi come and pick her up because he would have gone to work before her caretaker had arrived. One of the things that Melissa dearly loved about me was my car! I would come blazing by in my white Buick Skylark and she adored it. I remember when some years later we were talking about her going to college and we said, “Well, you know we could drive you up, or you could take a plane and then a taxi,” her little voice piped up: “That kid does not take a taxi to college!” (laughter) “I did that when I was in first grade and I'm NOT doing it in college.” (laughter)

Q: According to her father, Melissa wanted to talk to you because she maybe wanted to become a nurse. So you met Melissa, and hit it off, (Kahn confirms) but then, of course, you had to look at the fact that if you married Lu, you would be a stepmother —

KAHN: Again, I go back to saying — Lu had been widowed nine years, I think, when I met him, and I had been widowed much less time than that — less than a year when I met him. So I hadn't even begun to think about the idea of remarrying. I had only been getting used to the idea of dating again. Although I had been dating when I met Lu, there were times when I still found it uncomfortable and it wasn't something that seemed to come natural. However, Lu and I shared a lot of things in common, and I enjoyed Melissa, and I had a

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good time with him. So it seemed like an okay thing to do. And I was quite busy, and so on.

So since I hadn't thought about getting married again, I certainly hadn't thought about being a stepmother. Then, of course, I had not really known anybody in the Foreign Service. It was not something that I knew anything about. I knew there was a Foreign Service, and I knew that where I lived in Bethesda there were people who were in the Foreign Service who came and went with some dispatch, they didn't seem to be in the house, but I wasn't acquainted with them, anything like that. I really didn't know much about it.

As I began to get acquainted with him and learned about the Service, and met different people associated with it, and about the time that we were going together rather seriously one of his former ambassadors at a post in Africa, Ambassador Clark, was very ill and was actually dying of cancer. He was then being cared for at home by his wife, and one day we went there and the ambassador wanted to talk with me. We somehow arranged for Lu and Mrs. Clark to withdraw to the kitchen, and then Mr. Clark began to talk to me about the Foreign Service. He gave a very strong pitch, sort of like fatherly advice. I don't think Lu had said that we were going to be married but I'm sure Mr. Clark sensed this and proceeded to tell me the ins and outs of life in the Foreign Service, how important it was for a woman to be supportive of her husband, how it would be necessary for me to give up my work and so on — and on.

I found this sort of interesting, because we hadn't really spoken about getting married, but I thought it was sort of a marvelous — what shall I say — warm conversation, and even though in this time when he was so ill, that he was still concerned that people in the Service, particularly wives, should be very supportive of their husbands. I thought it was very sweet of him.

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But at the same time it sort of made me realize, in a moment of — what shall I say — understanding that women were subordinate to their husbands. And I thought to myself, “I see.” And then I thought, maybe Ed Clark, because he was in retirement, maybe there were women who were married to men in the Foreign Service but who also maintained their careers.

Q: And by that time, this was true.

KAHN: But you could hear, from his point of view, if you married somebody, you married them lock, stock and barrel and you sort of became immersed in their career.

Q: Well, also, I think, he was of the old school, of the time when I was in the Foreign Service when the woman was not permitted to have a career, unless she was an artist or something like that. Her husband always came first. “Two for the price of one.”

KAHN: That was really sort of my first introduction to somebody who was an ambassador, had been considered a very important person and a very respected Foreign Service officer.

Q: Although I was at your wedding, I don't remember what month that was.

KAHN: We were married in June of 1984. At this time Lu was on assignment here in the States, of course — had been for a couple of years, but knew that ultimately something would be coming out and we didn't know how long he would be Stateside or assigned overseas. What is the term that means “bidding on a position?”

Q: In my day, you were basically just sent.

KAHN: I don't know, but anyway Lu had been in Turkey and I met him almost immediately after he returned to the U.S. from his tour in Turkey. And we were here six months as a married couple. Married in June, by December when assignments were made Lu expected

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to be given an African post, or since his language facility was in Turkish and French there were a number of possibilities. The assignment he was given was to be on the staff of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in Vienna.

Q: You continued with your job at NIH during the first months of your marriage. (Kahn confirms) It was a pretty big job, wasn't it?

KAHN: Yes. It was an important one. My position was called Chief of Nursing Education, what they referred to as a "super chief" job in that structure. There was a director of the nursing department, who had several immediate deputies, and I was her deputy for nursing education. Then there was a group of people handling various nursing services but, essentially, during her vacation time I stood in for her, I very often represented her at various meetings. So I held a very responsible position.

Q: Was it fulfilling? Did you enjoy it?

KAHN: Oh, it was a wonderful position, I loved it. I fully intended at the time that I started to work at NIH in 1975 to complete a career in Civil Service, and would b(laughing) allowed to retire and receive Civil Service benefits, and you know I was career-bound. I expected that I would perhaps have an opportunity for added responsibilities with increased salary, and so on, when I came there.

Q: Sure. When you got your doctorate that would qualify you for some kind of —

KAHN: That's right — for additional responsibilities and perhaps within the institution itself. In addition to my work as Chief of Nursing Education I also worked in the evening graduate program as chairman of the nursing department there and was responsible for getting faculty for continuing education courses for nurses. So besides my salaried position at NIH I also had this part-time thing, but it was a very important and satisfying piece of work.

Q: So I suppose all of this was pretty lucrative, wasn't it?

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KAHN: Well, I wouldn't say it was especially lucrative but I would say that I was well paid for women at that time. My yearly salary came close to \$50,000 a year, which by the time I'd done the various things I did in the position at NIH as Chief of Nursing Education, I was part of what was known as the merit pay plan and I was a very productive person and frequently was rated "outstanding," so I would get a part of the money that was divided out of this pot provided for persons who performed very well, who were merit pay workers and supervised a lot of people. I was in charge of all the nursing professional education programs, I would have all nursing education that came out of the clinical center including things like national conferences where we'd have as many as 1,000 people attend. I had a great deal of responsibility and I supervised many people.

Q: I suppose it was pretty hard when you did decide to marry Lu, knowing that you'd be going overseas, to let go of all that.

KAHN: (laughing) I think when I did it I married him and didn't think about all that! When I look back on it, I'm not sure that I thought about that. I thought, "Well, he's here —" and I was very naive. Even though I was a mature woman

Q: And a grandmother.

KAHN: Yes, and had been married before to somebody who had worked in the government, who had moved around, although we'd become very stable here — my first husband had been the director of the National Wetlands program, so we'd lived here for some time and I considered myself by now to be sort of a Washingtonian. But when I married Lu I knew he'd had foreign assignments, he'd said to me there was a fairly good possibility that he would have to go overseas some time but I don't think I really faced up to it until it happened. An(she laughs) I didn't expect it to happen so soon.

So when it did happen, I thought, well, I'm a career civil servant, and surely since my husband is in the Foreign Service, which was considered prestigious and important, I

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thought “I will have no difficulty getting a leave of absence.” I knew doctors got leaves of absence and went overseas and did things, and I thought I wouldn't have any trouble either.

But let me tell you: as a woman in an important position, it was not possible. My supervisor wanted to fill the position behind me. After a great deal of stress I finally found it necessary to go directly to her supervisor, the director of the clinical center, and ask him to at least give me six months leave of absence, to allow me the possibility of looking into federal employment overseas — which I knew was a long shot, I mean I knew there might not be anything.

There I was, faced with being a new wife, a new stepmother, confronting the idea of getting a career that had been very good — by this time I had a number of years under my belt in terms of working toward ultimately a fulfilling career with potentially good retirement benefits. I look back on it and I think I was unable to [get a sabbatical] because I was a woman. I'm sure that had I been a man it might have been easy to get a leave of absence for three years.

Q: Well, you asked for six months, I don't know what good six months would have done.

KAHN: I was naive, again. I thought, well, I would go over to Austria, where I knew there was a position as nurse in the embassy and thought maybe I could get it. I can tell you more about that but to make a long story short, when I arrived I found out that the embassy nurse, while open for an American citizen, was not held, as you'd expect, for wives of diplomats who might want to work in line with the idea of a career. Then when it finally was open for employment, I went up one day and talked to a German woman of my acquaintance who worked in the health room at night, and said, “I understand this position is going to be vacant,” and she said, “Don't bother to apply for it, it's going to be filled by the wife of an ambassador.”

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There were five ambassadors, and the wife of one of them happened to be a nurse. The German said to me, "She'll get it, she's not as well qualified as you are but she'll get it." So the opportunity, though they had granted me six months leave of absence, it didn't do any good and ultimately I had to resign. I'd arrived over there with no idea that it would be so difficult. I was very naive, I did not realize that wives of American diplomats would not be welcomed in the work force in Austria. Besides that, nursing in Austria is a whole different thing than in the United States. I was not fluent in German, which would be necessary, but beyond that there weren't any positions, and they didn't hire American women anyway. So I said, okay, what to do?

Q: I suppose, Ruth, during the six months you had, you figured out that either you'd have to give up and return to the States, which I'm sure you didn't want to do, or you'd have to find something to do with yourself. Now, you couldn't very well go back to the U.S. because you had Melissa, a young girl, with you and I'm sure Lu was depending on you to be her mother.

KAHN: I think she was depending on me to be her mother. I don't know that L(laughing) was depending on me as much for that, but I would have to tell you that after we were married, the first thing Melissa said to me was, "Oh, now I can call you Mother!" So this was a very special moment for her, and for me. And I thought, here I've been without a 12-year-old for ten years, now suddenly here I am with a 12-year-old, and what am I going to do with her?

Let me take you back a moment: in making the decision to go with Lu to Austria, and in the process of working on my dissertation, I suddenly realized that if I went to Austria I would not have to work with, in the study of bereavement, the mothers of children who'd died of cancer. While I was trying to make a decision, I went to see my dean at Catholic University, a wonderful woman, Sister Rosemary Donnelly, now executive vice president or something at the University, and in this case it was marvelous that she held such great views about women following their husbands. I think that her loyalty came out of her

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Catholic heritage, and even though she was not married the idea that if you're a couple and your children are married, then you have a loyalty to each other.

I said to her, "Here I am — my dissertation is ready to be launched, the National Cancer Institute would probably be willing to fund it — I've understood that they would be very interested in supporting such a study — here I am faced with this very difficult problem." She looked at me and said, "Oh! choose a new topic — go to Austria and choose a new topic."

Q: You hadn't really got very far with your research for the ...

KAHN: Well, I had done all the literature review, and I was developing an intervention to be tested to see whether or not if I used this intervention the mothers of children who'd died of cancer would be better able to cope with that experience. I had achieved a rather solid idea of what I was going to do. And I had a top patient population — as you know, many times NIH is dealing with children with cancers for which no cures have been developed. There's a rather significant number of children that do die and where there would be mothers who really needed some assistance. And NIH was interested in trying to help those people who have consented to have their children participate in research that would ultimately help others even if it might not help that particular individual.

Q: You were farther along in that course than I had any idea.

KAHN: Well, it was a major decision to decide to dump it all and go off to this country where I wouldn't be speaking the language and — but anyway, I said "Okay." So Sister Donnelly said, "Choose a new topic." Lu had been told in December that he was going to Vienna, so I went over with him for two weeks in February to see what Austria looked like and so on, leaving Melissa here with the housekeeper.

Q: "The matchmaker."

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KAHN: (laughing) Yes. So I went to Austria. At the time I didn't know I was participating in anything that would ultimately be important historically, but my first Diplomatic dinner after I arrived was with the Deputy Chief of Mission Felix Bloch, who was Charg# at the moment. Later on as you know he had to face questions in the U.S. as to whether he had done some spying, but I don't mean to imply that I thought anything like that was going on then.

My husband had known him for 30 years, so it was very nice that he invited us over. But my very first experience was at their home and one of the remarkable things about it was — I liked [Mrs.] Bloch, I thought she was an interesting lady, but she seemed very unhappy with the Foreign Service. I thought, "Here's my first exposure to it." I guess, in retrospect, there were things going on in her life that made her unhappy, but at the time I thought, "Oh dear, here I've made this decision, I'm after six months leave of absence, I'm going over there — what have I done to myself?" (she laughs) I really was beginning to question this decision that I was making.

Q: But then you had a chance to meet a few other Foreign Service wives starting after that, didn't you?

KAHN: Fortunately, that was true. I met people like the [Fenneys], her husband, John, was at the embassy and she's a lovely person, who took us out to dinner and wine and dined us. So we had a very good time, except for the trouble I had adapting my body to the eight- or nine-hour time difference. For me that was a terrible problem — not for the first few days, but later, all of a sudden, it's like, I couldn't do ANYTHING, I simply couldn't get out of bed. My body wouldn't work. It was a very funny experience.

Q: This was a short trip to discover the lay of the land?

KAHN: We were looking at housing and so on. At the time, contrary to what many people have experienced, we had to look for housing on the open market; because of the large

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embassy staff, the UN Mission, et cetera, there simply wasn't adequate housing. By good fortune the man who was leaving the position of director of the UN Fund for Drug Abuse Control had an apartment and knew he'd be leaving in June. He asked, "What are you looking for?" and I said, "We have a daughter who's 12 and we need several bedrooms" and so on, and he said, "I live in a rather nice apartment building." It turned out to be simpler than we expected and turned out to be quite satisfactory housing. I had time there to play — it wasn't all consumed looking for housing. In February, Austria is a very gray overcast place but it was still terribly exciting for me because it was the first time in my life that I was going overseas to live.

Q: [Not just] to travel?

KAHN: No, not even that. So, for me, the devastation of leaving a position was somewhat mitigated by the fact that I knew I was going to have this excitement. One side of me was crying and feeling very sad for myself, the other part of me was saying, "This is a very exciting adventure." I think the reality of what I had actually done really didn't sink home until I returned to the U.S.

Maybe I can just skip that to tell you a bit about the impact of that decision. We returned to the U.S. in 1988 at the close of our three-year tour of duty. Lu was caught, as a FS Officer Class 01, or whatever it's called, in the process of trying to be promoted into senior service. The years in which he was eligible for promotion were the years we were in Austria — 1985, '86 and '87, the Reagan years, during which there was the lowest rate ever of promotions in the Foreign Service for officers to cross the threshold.

Lu was up for promotion, and despite the fact that he had "Outstanding" performance ratings from the ambassador and everybody seemed very pleased with his work, the Service at this time wasn't enforcing the language requirements — something like 40% of those promoted during those years actually met language requirements. Naturally we were devastated by this, because Lu was fluent in Turkish, a difficult language, the government

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had spent a long time educating him — he'd spent ten years at different times in Turkey and had the highest capability in both spoken and written Turkish; and he was fluent and could work in French.

So, not only had I given up my career, I'd given up my dissertation, but here Lu was faced with losing his career involuntarily through mandatory requirement. This turned out to be a devastating experience. Well, I was over 50 when I married Lu, I went overseas, had given up my career, was too young to get retirement benefits, came back to the U.S. but had been gone too long and had no rights to be reinstated.

I don't know what you know about the “glass ceiling” for women in government, but it didn't matter how well qualified you are or what your credentials are, you're “older.” I was faced with the great difficulty of having — even though I had “Outstanding” evaluations and an excellent performance record, and a doctorate — I had a very difficult [time].

A “glass ceiling” is at work, (she laughs). It's difficult to penetrate. I had a very, very hard time getting back to work. Because I was older, many of the people who knew me well had retired, but I was fortunate in that ultimately I secured a position and returned to government. The person who interviewed me had been at my farewell party at NIH and she remembered my work and hired me. But it took me a year.

So I feel like what I lost was — if you figure on the four years that I didn't work, four years that I missed an income of \$50,000, if you look at what I lost in terms of not earning retirement credit I lost a great deal. So while it was a terribly exciting experience, and it was wonderful to meet a lot of people, I had great fun, it was an enormous loss to me economically.

If I had my druthers, one of the things I think should happen is that minimally, for those people who are serving for the federal government, it should be required of their employers that if the person is married to a someone who goes overseas at the behest of

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government, that that position be held for that person or that the individual be allowed to take leave as part of that commitment.

Q: That would certainly seem fair to me!

KAHN: I know that now in the Fairfax, Virginia educational system, women are returning to work there and do get some leave there. But I think this whole issue of being married to someone who serves at the government's pleasure and may serve in a difficult area — I didn't serve in a difficult area, I don't in any way want to convey that I thought it was difficult to live in Austria, I was very fortunate — but I don't care who you are, as a woman if you're attempting to develop a career, it's going to be damaging to your career.

Q: Absolutely.

KAHN: Somehow, something needs to be done, because we are now a society of two career people in the family. So it doesn't matter whether the man is married to the woman and goes overseas or the woman is married to the man: some accommodation needs to be made to that.

Q: I'm a little curious, Ruth, about your shift in the subject for your doctorate. You did go ahead with that? The good Sister gave you an idea of what you might do?

KAHN: No, she said to me, "Go over there, have a good time, but within a year decide what you're going to do and get back here and do it." So I didn't know how difficult what I was doing was going to be or how expensive it was. I'd decided I wanted to achieve this doctorate as a personal goal, as something I had committed a lot of my money to, and I thought, "I'm going to do it, and Lu is committed to it."

So I looked around and said, "What can I do?" The whole area of bereavement and loss was something that I had a great deal of knowledge of. I listened to what it was that people were saying in Austria that seemed to be important. What I heard was the mothers of the

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students at the American International School were all talking about how difficult it was for their children to move so often. They were talking about whether they were the child that was left or the child that moved — they all experienced feelings of depression and rejection. More or less, I said, “Hey, this is really a lot, and what they're really talking about is how an adolescent copes with the issue of bereavement. In this case it was brought about by geographic mobility or the fact of a change of location.

So I began to search the literature on that. I took a trip to England and studied in the library there — I'd tried to use the library in Austria and it was absolutely fascinating. (she laughs) I have to tell you these stories. As I was going through the library I was hunting for Dissertation Abstracts — you know, the big thick book that tells you who's done what. So I went to the library at the University and explained to the gentleman at the desk what I wanted to do and he said, “Oh, well, our students here don't do that, they simply send to England for this.” He told me that the Austrian students who are on some sort of a budget, they get assistance from the government while they're doing it, they use the British Library and through it they would request photocopies of whatever it was they wanted from a bibliography that had been done via computer.

But that wasn't available to me, I couldn't do that. It would have cost me heavily to pay the British Library to do this, so I decided that the only way I could manage it financially was to go to England. I combined my literature search with a trip of the American Women's Club and flew to England, where I rented a hotel room, and went to the British Library and looked up articles and studies I needed to have and copied stacks of material. While the Club members were looking for the Queen and visiting museums and so on, I wa(laughing) in the Library. Anyway, I got the material. Back in Austria I worked with the American International School and eventually did my study there and completed the dissertation.

Q: Did you get it written while you were there?

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KAHN: Not all of it. I put it together and conducted the experiments and so on. Shortly after we returned to the U.S. I realize (she laughs) my husband was unemployed now, so I'd better finish this dissertation and get reemployed. So I began on a three-point program — first, to buck up my husband, second, to work on my dissertation, and third, to get back to work.

Meanwhile, we said, what to do with Melissa? She was beginning her senior year in high school. We had hoped to be in Austria long enough for her to complete high school there. Well, you can imagine, coming back to Washington, DC: she'd been used to an American school in Austria, and at our return there were guns in the schools here. The whole atmosphere of education was [different]. We thought it over, and I pondered all the stress that Lu was under, the stress I was under, and concluded, talking it over with Lu and Melissa, that the best thing for her would be for her not to go to school here. She didn't know anybody, by now the girls she'd known in grade school here had all had babies, and the young men had gone off to the Army. She literally knew no one in high school.

We found a small, very nice boarding school for her in Minnesota which was very near two of my daughters. We went out there, looked it over, she had interviews there. We gave her some choices in what she could do, and she decided that school was what she wanted. So she went through her senior year, in a program which would help prepare her for college.

Q: That was a good choice. I hadn't recalled what happened, thinking perhaps you left her with a family so she could complete her high school in Vienna.

KAHN: Well, we thought about that but another very difficult problem had occurred. During Melissa's junior year we were going through the stress of being mandatorily retired. The Marines in Vienna were going nutty. Here was Phillips Bloch, sort of in charge of the embassy, but I think others would support my saying here that there were many things improperly attended to. The Marines were very strongly pressing the American girls at the

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high school; and I don't mean to say the girls weren't interested, too, but there were many inappropriate and difficult issues arising.

For example, we discovered that at 16 Melissa was somehow being, shall I say, chased by one of the Marines. Lu phoned the officer in charge of the Marines unit and lodged a complaint, that he did not feel that the young Marines even though they were miles from home should be fooling around with the young girls. He asked that his call be held in confidence so it would not harm Melissa, but he had no sooner left the office of the person who was dealing with this issue than Melissa got a phone call, from a Marine, in fact, saying that her father had been there and that the Marine had been chastised.

So to make a long story short, there was no way we could leave her there, even though that might have been desirable had the situation with the Marine not been [happening]. Also, as you may remember, the scandal of the young Indian Marine who had been spying for Russia occurred while we were there. So there were many problems — too many for us to cope with at that time.

Q: I'm glad you were able to find a boarding school.

KAHN: And she had a marvelous experience. She loved it. It worked out to be a just right experience for her. She found it met her particular needs. From there, she went to college. She'll graduate this year.

Q: Well, you've told me about some of the down side of your going to Vienna, but I'm sure there was an up side too, that you had some interesting experiences there you would never have had if you'd stayed in the U.S. for the whole of your life. Did you meet any interesting people, for instance?

KAHN: Oh, it was marvelous. I don't want to leave the impression that my life was miserable because I had these things happen. Economically it's gotten worse, but that doesn't make it a miserable life. (she laughs) What really happened is that we met very

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interesting people, and it was a terribly exciting time for us. For example, our ambassador, Bruce Chapman, a charming, jovial, very social kind of fellow, and his wife Sarah and an absolute delight — people have asked me, “Did the ambassador's wife make you do something?” and I was very lucky, I had a wonderful ambassador's wife, and Lu had wonderful persons to work for in the persons of the Chapmans.

The other thing neat about it is that Bruce had been close enough to the higher echelons of government so that it attracted nice people to come to Vienna, and then we would often get invited to the dinners! So that turned out to be lots of fun for me. Maybe people got sick of this if they spent many years in Vienna, but it was new to me, so I thought it was fun. Among the people we met were Ursula and the Attorney General Meese. She was really a lovely lady. One night I had the opportunity to sit across from her at dinner and talk about life in Washington. She was such a down-to-earth kind of person. We went to the opera with them. It was a grand experience. I wouldn't expect ordinarily to have that kind of opportunity.

Q: I wanted to ask you about Ursula Meese. I remember that while he was in office, one of their children was killed in an auto accident. With your interest in grieving parents who lose children, did that happen after you left the Meeses?

KAHN: It had happened before we met them. I remember, because we lived in Bethesda when that accident occurred. But she did happen to talk about it that evening when someone asked about it. She wasn't speaking to me directly but she did talk about how difficult that experience had been for her and how it continued to be difficult. I can't recall the particular group that she was working with but she was very sensitive to parents who had lost a child and was very kind in trying to help others who'd gone through that kind of an experience. I would say that it had been perhaps five years earlier than the time when I met her.

Q: Who else did you meet beside the Meeses?

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KAHN: I have to tell you, our ambassador was a very sociable fellow, so because our Mission was small we were often also included in the bilateral events. There were two ambassadors that served in the Bilateral Commission at the time that I was there — Helene Van Damm and [Bruce Chapman]. Our ambassador, Bruce Chapman, was our representative to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, and our ambassador to Austria was Helene Van Damm.

She was a very beautiful woman, a very attractive woman. I didn't know anything about her but my first experience was going to the orientation at the embassy, an(laughing) having conducted literally thousands of orientations for people, I was very interested in how this was going to be done. I recall she went up to the front of the room, and she sat down on the desk. And if you think about how the President [sat] when he spoke from the Oval Office, she put her hands across and [the audience] still seated in front, talked about what the nature of the Bilateral Mission was, then she got up and with her entourage she left.

Q: Did you get to know her personally?

KAHN: I sat next to her on several occasions quite by accident. Generally speaking you wouldn't expect me to sit next to her but sometimes when the United States Mission was doing things and she came, she was sort of an independent spirit and didn't sit where she was expected to sit, then by accident I would be seated near her. I would say she felt very comfortable chatting with men and she was very good at it. She was so good at it, as a matter of fact, that while we were there, it seemed that she got into sort of an entanglement, I guess one could say, with Eric Goettler of the Sacher Hotel — which you know is a marvelous place: it was absolutely incredible to go there. Not only is it famous for Sacher torte but for its little spots where you could carry on intrigues — they're sort of spots, where there are almost little curtains you can sit behind. The Sacher Hotel has marvelous art in it, and the American Women's Club had an art tour sometimes from top to

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bottom. It's marvelous. I could never afford to stay there but I often imagine that some day I'll go back to Austria, then I'll rent a room at the Sacher Hotel!

Q: Helene Van Damm when she went over there as ambassador was a never man's woman, or divorced, or — ?

KAHN: She had a husband when she came there and I really don't know much about that, except that apparently he left. There was a lot in the paper about him and eventually she left, and then her replacement as ambassador was Estee Lauder's son, of the perfume industry. He had a wife, who was a lovely, lovely woman and they had two children who attended the American International School for one year. And it was really grand that they attended the School because a number of things happened to it while they were there. A wonderful chain-link fence was put up that was very protective — you know, there were a number of international incidents going on about this time. For example, there was a bomb that went off along the Danube. No one was injured, but it was kind of an emotionally difficult time for many people because there was a lot of fear that Americans would be targeted for acts of terrorism. So that made it difficult. But there were a lot of very nice parties. We were there for the Christmas party. There was also the brouhaha about the young Marine Sergeant Lonetree, the Indian, alleged to have become involved in KGB activities and spying for the USSR when he was assigned in Moscow before coming to Vienna. I don't recall how that turned out but at any rate that was going on. So there was a lot of concern about was there loyalty or wasn't there, did his Russian girlfriend come to Vienna or didn't she. There was a lot of gossip — as to whether or not actual espionage was going on I couldn't say.

Q: But it was big, I remember it hit the front pages over here.

KAHN: So life was never dull. One of the other great events that occurred when we were there. As part of his assignment to the U.S. Mission to the U.N., Lu was involved in the various drug organizations that are based in the U.N., such as the International Narcotics

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Control Board and others. And while we were there, a world conference on drug trafficking and drugs. So I met people who were in the drug-enforcing agencies, we met people who were international narcotic agents.

This had a lot of excitement for me. They didn't seem excited about it, but I found it very interesting, because you read about them in the newspaper, I mean, you would read about DEA Agent seizing such-and-such. So, when you met these people and their leaders, it was, I thought, a very unusual opportunity. You wouldn't look at them and say, "Aha! That person is a Narcotics Interpol, that sort." The international police in narcotics were often very nondescript people, not at all sort of like agents in TV drug-running episodes.

So that was not only educational but interesting. Then, because Lu was participating in events of the United Nations, such as the International Year of the Child and others while we were there that involved family issues, even though I'd been at NIH where a lot of international meetings took place, these were international meetings of a higher order and one had the opportunity to hear really what it was like and what the problems of women really were in terms of their health, social concerns, and so on. So I found it not only stimulating but educational also.

Q: You and Lu met and married at least in part because Louisa had discovered that you both liked music and ballet. I have been to Vienna, albeit briefly, but I know very well that it's a place where you can feast on music. Did you?

KAHN: Oh we did, we had a marvelous, marvelous opportunity. We went to the opera as often as we felt we could afford to go and as time permitted. We would buy seats at the very top of the Statsoper and we didn't care, because you could see and hear wonderfully. We saw and heard marvelous productions there — many, many of them, such as Carmen, and Fidelio. In Vienna, Pavarotti is considered second only to God and there is so much excitement when he comes. At the end of an opera when he was singing, people darted out of their seats, ran down front, started clapping and hollering and cheering; it was like a

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stampede. I had never just never seen anything like it; real worshipers of Pavarotti. It was grand.

I want to tell you about one other neat experience. As I said, Reagan was President then, and Maureen Reagan was the head of delegation of the UN women's programs. She is a very attractive, very tall woman, very independent, with her own ideas as to how things shall go. Lu was often control officer for her. On one particular night she was having a cocktail in the Intercontinental Hotel. We came into the room and there she stood, in the center, close to six feet tall, wearing a beautiful black spangly top. All of a sudden, she saw us enter and she threw open her arms and cried, "LU! I LOVE you!" Of course, every head turned and looked at us, but she didn't mention me at in her call. Oh, dear! I thought, what to do? So I stepped aside to talk to the nearest [person], who turned out to be a Russian woman. Their women did not speak English, but the Russian delegate, who happened to be the USSR ambassador to the UN, spoke English. I couldn't help but notice how different the Russian women looked from Maureen Reagan, although both had "equal" posts. She was wearing the beautiful sequined dress and they, all three, looked exactly alike in knit brown very ordinary dresses; yet probably wielded the same kind of power.

Q: Besides that one trip to England you took with the women's club, did you and Lu get a chance to travel in Europe a bit?

KAHN: Oh, we did. Our first year in Vienna we took one of the most emotionally satisfying trips. A cousin of Lu and his wife were bringing over some American students to ski during the holidays and we were to meet in Switzerland high in the Alps. En route there by train, snow began to fall, we were traveling through this gently falling snow into the mountains. It was absolutely beautiful, it was magical! I thought, "How can I be concerned about my dissertation?" (both laughing) "How can I be concerned about my loss of work when I'm going through this exquisitely beautiful experience?"

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So, yes, we saw Switzerland, we went to Germany, to Florence. And while we were in Rome — Melissa and I often say, “Wherever there are Gypsies, we’ll find Lu.” There we were, about to cross a bridge and people on the other side were shouting at us, but not speaking Italian we didn’t realize they were trying to alert us that some Gypsies were following us. As we started across the bridge, two young girls who were smaller than Melissa, tried to go after our airline tickets that Lu had in his pocket. I said, “Lu, quick! Zip up your jacket. They’re trying to steal your tickets.” Melissa and I were trying to poke them in the eyes, bat them, until finally I said, “Enough of this” and just whammed them with my purse. I felt terrible, as though I was abusing kids, but these were just kids. Anyway, they finally left. As we continued on our way, we looked back. The woman who was with them, whether she was their mother, who could say, but she was evidently going over the experience — what had happened, what they hadn’t done right, gesturing with her hands and they were looking at us.

Q: Oh, the Gypsies in Italy — I’ve had experiences with them, too. Did you have anything in the way of domestic help in Vienna?

KAHN: I was fortunate. I had a young woman, a Filipino — you know how they pass on to the new apartment occupant whoever had worked there? Cerito was her name, so she came and worked for us one day a week. A lovely person and we enjoyed her a lot. I’m surprised, thinking how busy I was. I didn’t think, at first, I needed any help — what am I going to do? I won’t be working. In our first two and a half years we were occupied four to five nights a week, depending on what went on at the UN. Toward the end of our tour, the changes there resulted and we were less occupied. So I was grateful that I had her. The apartment wouldn’t have accommodated a live-in servant.

Q: It sounds as though you had some wonderful, exciting, magical experiences. Did you have any bad or frightening ones?

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KAHN: Actually I had one or two experiences I didn't know what to make of. One day I went to an American women's group luncheon at the Intercontinental Hotel. The wife of one of our embassy officers and I were looking over the menu, and she — Ingrid, a German by birth, exclaimed, "Oh, look, they've got this wonderful (using the German name for it) pancake with berries. Let's have that." I said, "Okay, I'm game, I'll try something new." So we ate it. Then we went downstairs, and after about 15 minutes looking at things in the gift shop, I said to her, "I don't feel very well. I think we should go home." We got on the metro and I repeated how I felt, and rather than transfer to a bus, we took a taxi, which I said I'd be happy to pay for. We took the taxi, and as we got closer to the apartment, I felt worse — lightheaded, as though I'd pass out.

I remember nothing after that, although I got out of the taxi, entered the apartment, locked the door, and must have changed my clothes because they were different when I came to. Apparently, I had tossed my cookies and been very sick. When Melissa came home, she tried to call her father but couldn't reach him. Ingrid's husband Ken said to Lu when he came home, "I think our wives have gotten into something." Ingrid was also ill, less so than I was — I was hallucinating, talkative, completely "out of it" (she laughs).

Apparently either there were accidental or intentional poisons as part of the wild berry [filling]. I was terribly sick, it took me four or five days to recover. Ingrid seemed to get over it that evening. The embassy's doctor was out of town, Lu didn't dare leave me alone, stayed home the next day with me. A woman who called me at the end of that day realized I was "out of it" and called the president of the American Womens' Association, who was bilingual, went down to the hotel, learned that several of the luncheon guests had become very ill, and showed the bill of fare. The hotel person said, "We don't have any more of that particular item left." The menu had offered a choice and not everyone had ordered the pancake. We were the only two who'd gotten sick but they knew by talking to me that I was quite out of my head. So that was sort of a frightening experience. (laughing) I thought, "I'll never order this whatever-it-is, this wild berry thing, again!" To this day I have

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no idea whether I had a poisonous berry, or whether someone intentionally poisoned us, the American women; because this was the period of the terrorism scare, or what.

The second thing that happened to me. I had a white Buick Skylark, and turning the key to enter the apartment the garage door opened up. For some reason, perhaps because of my years as a widow, I was always careful when I went into my garage. I always looked in my rear-view mirror to make sure no one was behind me. This time, I inserted the key, looked in my mirror, and was floored to see a man holding a big press camera in kind of a less-than-perfect-condition car, sort of resembling a white Plymouth, and sitting next to him a woman with very bleached hair — I remember her because of that; the man was dark, looked Middle Eastern.

I thought, “What is he doing here?” I realized he was taking my picture. By this time, the garage door was up. I quickly ran in, looked behind me as the garage door closed. Then I thought, “Now what do I do? Do I sit in my car? Am I being photographed?” Then I thought, “Well, I can't sit in the car in the garage, I'll have to get out.” And with another key to turn, I was very cautious going up to the apartment. As soon as I got inside, I called Lu and said, What about this.”

Well, Lu never gets very excited about anything. (both laugh) “Are you alright?” “Yes,” I said, “but this is weird.” And we talked about it. The next day, I decided to go down and talk to security at the embassy. They neither said “that's too bad” or “you don't have to worry” or “you do have to worry,” but they asked me the intelligent action I hadn't taken — “What was the license number?” (mimicking a guilty cry) “I have no idea! All I could think about was getting into my apartment.” So that, too, like the berries, was a mystery. Disconcerting but an unsolved mystery.

Q: You certainly have given us a lot of interesting information on all levels here and I've enjoyed hearing every bit of it.

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KAHN: Thank you. It was a great experience. If I tried to summarize it and say, "There were marvelously wonderful high points. I think that it was terribly traumatic for me, as a relatively new wife, to see the enormously difficult problems that surrounded Lu and members of his Foreign Service class when they were mandatorily retired. It was an experience people weren't prepared for, and that we just did not imagine would happen. It has made me probably be [a] more [cautious] wife too lat(laughing) whatever happens. But I think perhaps some things I might have done differently, I'm not sure. I don't live in regret, but I think that given the situation that I experienced, there are things that could be done to make it possible for women to go overseas with their husbands with some degree of security attached to their work.

Q: Thank you very much.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA:

Spouse: Louis E. Kahn
Spouse's Position: First Secretary, Alternate Permanent Rep. to U.N.O., Vienna

Spouse Entered Service: November 1958
Left Service: December 1988
You Entered Service: 1984
Left Service: Same

Status: Spouse of Retiree

Posts: 1985-1988
Vienna, Austria

Place/Date of birth: Hillhead, South Dakota, May 17, 1930
Maiden Name: Hoff (Carlsen)

Parents:

Fred Hoff - blacksmith, farmer, contractor, merchant

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Liala Hoff - teacher

Schools:

BS, Nursing - University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

MS, Nursing; DS, Nursing - Catholic University, Washington, DC

Profession: Nursing

Date/Place of Marriage:

June 6, 1951-1983, the late John C. Carlsen

June 17, 1984, Louis E. Kahn

Children: 4 by first marriage, all educated at St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN

Melissa Kahn, step-daughter

Positions held: A. At Post: Substitute school nurse Nurse-Educator/Researcher at the American International School Taught AIDS prevention classes, parenting of adolescents

B. In Washington, DC: Chief, Nursing Education, Clinical Center, National Institute of Health, Bethesda, MD Health Manpower Education Specialist, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Honors: cum laude; with distinction, Comprehensive Exams, Master's Program

End of interview